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RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0007  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000176

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/31/2016  
TAGS: [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [CE](#)  
SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: MORE PRO-LTTE AID WORKERS REPORTED  
MISSING IN THE EAST; QUESTIONS ABOUND

REF: COLOMBO 172

Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

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SUMMARY  
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11. (C) Summary: One day after January 31 reports that five Tamil Rehabilitation Organization (TRO) staff members had been abducted near an Army checkpoint (Reftel), TRO reported that another three TRO personnel have disappeared en route from Batticaloa to Kilinochchi. The Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) inquiry into the two incidents is continuing, but SLMM Spokeswoman Helen Olafsdottir acknowledged that aspects of the two reports from TRO "don't sound 100 percent convincing." A special team sent by the Inspector General of Police to Batticaloa to investigate the first report has so far been unable to interview any of the 10 people who reportedly witnessed the abductions. A January 31 press statement by the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) in response to the first report placed greater emphasis on denying GSL involvement in the disappearances than on promising GSL efforts to investigate the incident--an unfortunate indication of an obstructionist attitude that can do little to defuse mounting tensions. That said, the fact that so far none of the alleged eyewitnesses has come forward to tell police their version of events undermines, to some degree, the credibility of these reports. The ongoing SLMM inquiry into these incidents should shed further light. End summary.

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BERMUDA TRIANGLE NORTH OF BATTICALOA?  
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12. (SBU) One day after January 31 reports that five Tamil Rehabilitation Organization (TRO) staff members had been abducted near an Army checkpoint (Reftel), TRO reported that another three of its personnel were abducted near the same check-point as they were traveling from Batticaloa to

Kilinochchi the night of January 29. The missing three personnel, who include two TRO administrators and a driver attached to TRO's Kilinochchi office, had gone to Batticaloa January 28-29 to check on a Norwegian-funded preschool project there. Two preschool teachers were reportedly in the van with the TRO staff when it was stopped; the two teachers, who are not TRO staff, were apparently released. Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) personnel in Batticaloa were to interview the teachers on February 1; as of 5:00 p.m. local time SLMM Spokeswoman Helen Olafsdottir told us she had no information that those interviews had taken place.

13. (SBU) In a telephone conversation with poloff on February 1, a TRO official in Colombo said that the remaining 10 people who had been released in the incident reported January 31 (reftel) included nine female TRO trainees and a driver who had been hired for the trip and was not a TRO staff member. According to what those released had told TRO, the abductors initially blindfolded all 15 and took them to a jungle area, where they were held and interrogated for two hours. All 15 were then reportedly driven back to their original location, whereupon the 10 were released. One of those released reportedly said that she had seen a white van parked along the road about 10-15 meters past the Army checkpoint. Once the TRO vehicle cleared the checkpoint, the van began following the TRO vehicle, stopping it about 100 meters from the checkpoint, she said.

14. (SBU) In a February 1 conversation with Foreign Secretary H.M.G.S. Palihakkara, the Ambassador expressed

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concern about the reported abductions/disappearances and urged a speedy and transparent investigation. Palihakkara

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replied that the Inspector General of Police had already sent a special team to Batticaloa to look into the first report, but that Government efforts to investigate were being hampered by TRO's refusal to make the 10 alleged eyewitnesses available to the police. When poloff raised this matter with the TRO official, noting the difficulty of having an in-depth investigation if access to eyewitnesses is not provided, he answered that some of the young women had apparently returned to homes in Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)-controlled territory and that his organization was attempting to "facilitate," with SLMM and ICRC cooperation, a meeting between the witnesses and the police. He went on to dispute the veracity of parts of the Government's January 31 press release (see para 5 below), asserting that the families of some of the TRO staff had attempted to file a complaint with Welikanda police and been turned away. A complaint had been subsequently filed with the Batticaloa police.

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GOVERNMENT: IT AIN'T US  
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15. (U) On January 31 the Government Information Department released the following press statement regarding the alleged abductions of the five TRO personnel reported earlier that day (Reftel):

Media reports have alleged that five members of the Tamil Rehabilitation Organization, an organization with links to the LTTE, have been abducted on the A11 road yesterday afternoon in close proximity to the Welikanda check-point. The government categorically denies any such incident taking place in close proximity to the Welikanda check-point.

Furthermore, there are no records of Police entries or statements made to any police stations and Army detachments in the area regarding this incident. The only record of such an incident is a telephone call made by Pulidevan (Note: head of the LTTE Peace Secretariat) of the LTTE in Kilinochchi to the SLMM this morning. The Government

confirms that no arrests or detentions of such persons have been made by the Police or security forces.

Following media reports of the alleged incident, the Inspector-General of Police has directed a CID (Criminal Investigative Department) team to record a statement from the TRO office in Colombo. The police will conduct a full investigation into the alleged incident to ascertain the true facts of the case.

V.P.K. Anusha Palpita  
Director of Information  
Government Information Department

End text of Government statement.

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SLMM: REPORTS ARE "A BIT STRANGE"  
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16. (C) In a February 1 conversation with poloff, Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) Spokeswoman Helen Olafsdottir said that SLMM's Batticaloa office was investigating both reports.

Although SLMM personnel had met with one or two of the young women reportedly released in reftel incident, the SLMM had obtained "no proper statements" from the alleged eyewitnesses yet. Characterizing the twin reports of abductions near Welikanda as "a bit strange," Olafsdottir remarked that aspects of the stories as provided by TRO "don't sound 100 percent convincing." If the eight abductees had actually met with foul play, it would be very difficult to cover up, she mused. Investigations are continuing, however, Olafsdottir

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said, adding that she understood SLMM Batticaloa would be able to meet with the two preschool teachers soon. When asked whether SLMM had been approached, as the TRO official had claimed to us, about "facilitating" a meeting between the eyewitnesses and GSL authorities, Olafsdottir said she was unaware of any such request from TRO. "We have a lot of questions about what actually happened," she concluded, but are awaiting the report from the Batticaloa office before making any judgments.

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COMMENT  
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17. (C) The reports of these two incidents from TRO are confusing, and the purported eyewitnesses' unwillingness so far to make a statement to GSL investigators is not providing any greater clarity. We expect that the SLMM report may shed some light on recent events. In our conversations with TRO, we have underscored the importance of giving GSL authorities access to the eyewitnesses so that the investigation can proceed. Until that access is provided, it will be hard to fault the government for failure to investigate diligently. That said, the nitpicking, defensive tone of the GSL statement (denying the incident took place near an Army check-point, rather than expressing concern or promising a full investigation; denying a police report was filed in the area, instead of acknowledging a police report was filed in Batticaloa) is unhelpful and will only confirm Tamil suspicions of GSL obstructionism, an especially unwelcome development as we inch towards ceasefire talks in Geneva.  
LUNSTEAD